

# Understanding the Adjustment Needs of International Graduate Students

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## Abstract

A qualitative work that examines the myriad of adjustment challenges, both independently and collectively, that plague international graduate students upon entering the US and the host university.

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### Abstract

The international graduate student population is a unique one that has specific needs that differ from domestic students and other acculturating groups. International graduate students face social, financial, and other stressors rooted in language proficiency while dealing with academic performance demands that accompany being a graduate student (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). Furthermore, many international students studying at American universities tend to experience major adjustment challenges dealing with the unfamiliarity with American customs and traditions in addition to the lack of emotional and social support. The goals of this qualitative, narrative case study were to explore the needs of international graduate students in regards to their adjustment and explore whether the needs of this population are being met.

*Keywords:* Xenophobia, Health, International, Graduate, Adjustment, Challenges

### Problem

In 1950, the number of international students receiving their graduate education in the United States was 1.1%. Forty years later, that number grew to 2.9%. According to a report published in 2015 through the Institute of International Education, international students make up 4.8% of the student population in the US (Institute of International Education, 2015). This number is indicative of what the future looks like in terms of international students opting to attend U.S. universities for their graduate education. For the purposes of understanding the challenges that international graduate students might face, the umbrella term of Acculturation served as a guiding construct during this study. Broadly, acculturation can be understood as the cultural socialization process that an individual undergoes as they navigate their way through a new environment and society.

Another construct that was focused on throughout this research was Cultural Competence in regards to the ways in which host university staff seeks to meet the needs of their visiting students. Cultural Competence is an ongoing process and is essentially, a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that align in a system, agency, or professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations. For international graduate students, it is especially challenging to acculturate as their academic requirements and demands differ from that of a domestic or undergraduate student (Sullivan & Kashubeck-West, 2015). In order to gain insight as to what is needed to provide the international graduate student with opportunities to successfully adjust to their host university's culture, it is important that we understand the topic as it relates to several key

factors: stress and its management techniques/strategies, lack of social connectedness, financial stressors, language fluency/barriers, and academic challenges/difficulties. These obstacles in adjusting to a new culture, language, and academic environment, which stem from emotions of social isolation, being homesick, and culture shock, to name a few, all have the ability to affect how well the student adjusts (Baba & Hosoda, 2014).

As international graduate students sojourn from their home country to the U.S. to embark on their graduate career, there are many adjustment challenges that they encounter. These challenges are particular in nature as they differ from those of domestic graduate students. As researchers Sullivan and Kashubeck-West (2015) explain, the difficulties that international students experience is more extensive in nature. These challenges are potentially long lasting as international students face pressures in their adjustment process that have to do with cultural differences in the academic learning environment and style in addition to language barriers (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Over 121,637 international graduate students currently study at American universities. As an increase in mobility continues, there has also been an increase in international students attending universities in the United States (Cadd, 2012). Furthermore, as the trend in institutions of higher education promoting internationalization increases, the importance of understanding this population's needs gains importance. Subsequently, the strategizing efforts in recruiting international students in order to promote internationalization is also broadened (Hendrickson et al., 2013).

It is important to note that there are several ways in which the international graduate student provides benefits to the host university. International students provide opportunities for cultural diversity on university campuses, which in turn provides domestic students exposure to other cultures (Billings & Terkla, 2014). Institutions of higher education are increasingly valuing diversity on their campus and are understanding that global outreach will also serve their academic reputation well (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015). Furthermore, international graduate students are also able to help increase both the intellectual and cultural environments at the host university. In addition to academic related benefits are financial ones. Unless international students have a graduate assistantship, they typically pay the full tuition amount of the host university, which helps to subsidize fees of their domestic student colleagues (Chen, Liu, Zhao, & Yeung, 2015).

The goals of this qualitative, narrative case study were to first explore the needs of international graduate students in regards to their adjustment in obtaining their graduate degree at a public university located in Illinois and how both their mental and physical health were affected. Currently, at the university, there are over 98 countries represented by both undergraduate and graduate students. More specifically, the number of international graduate students studying at the university continues to increase. In 2005, there were 882 international students and in 2015 that number grew to nearly 1000. As this number continues to rise in conjunction with shifting societal factors that have the potential to affect the international graduate students experience while at the university, it is important that University staff, which include but are not limited to full and part-time employees who work in (on and off)campus housing, student affairs, security, student rights and responsibilities, as well as community members, are aware of the particular needs attached to this population and the ways in which they can play a role in fostering a welcoming environment.

## Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to gain an in depth understanding of the adjustment needs of international graduate students at the host university. In order to do so, I employed a qualitative, narrative case study approach. Ultimately, the data gathered from the study, which was done through both focus groups and one-on-one interviews, was used to answer four research questions: 1) What are the academic and social adjustment needs of first time U.S. entering international graduate students at the host university?; 2) In what ways do these needs affect the mental and physical health of international graduate students as they acculturate?; 3)What services does the host university offer and/or need to expand upon in order to ensure that the needs of international graduate students are being met, primarily in regards to their mental health?; 4) What are the gaps in services to address the needs of international graduate students at the host university? There are, of course, a variety of factors that play a part in the adjustment needs that plague

international graduate students and their adjustment to the host university. In order to adequately meet the needs of this population, these factors should be understood both independently and collectively.

## Literature Review

Many of the acculturating factors have the ability to be confounding in nature. For example, language barriers have the potential to ultimately lead to confusion and anxiety for the international graduate student due to difficulty with course material and assignments (Bai, 2016). This, in turn, typically conjures up feelings of isolation and alienation (Erichsen & Bollinger, 2010). In addition to the aforementioned language barriers and feelings of anxiety and isolation is culture shock and its effect on the international graduate student's overall acculturation experience. The acculturation process is believed to exist across two dimensions, behavioral and cognitive (Berry, 2009). The behavioral dimension involves the international graduate student becoming increasingly knowledgeable of the values, practices, and customs of the host university. The cognitive or psychological dimension allows for the emotional attachment that the individual experiences within the host culture to be strengthened through these new cultural changes (Capielo, Delgado-Romero, & Stewart, 2015; Crocker, 2002).

Acculturation should be understood as a process, while not attaching a positive or negative connotation to it. Acculturative stress, however, is the typically negative reactions that international graduate students experience in response to their new identity and as their behaviors and values change. Additionally, international graduate students experience higher levels of stress overall and more psychological issues than domestic students (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). The adjustment process involves feelings of discomfort as the individual feels pressured to adapt to their new environment (Baba & Hosoda, 2014). Acculturative stress is experienced as individuals attempt to adapt to their new culture (Berry, 2009).

The relationship between acculturative stress and mental health is an important area to explore as the international graduate student's psychological maladjustment can affect their overall acculturation experience at the host university (Berry, 2009). The effects of acculturative stress are not only long lasting but also typically get to a crisis level within the first six months of the student arriving at the host university (Chalungsooth & Schneller, 2011). One of the primary hardships and challenges encountered by international graduate students while studying in the U.S., is the culture shock that they experience (Chapdelaine & Alexitch, 2004). Culture shock involves both the adjustment and adaptation processes that the international student experiences as they deal with behavioral, cognitive, and demographic factors (Erickson & Bollinger, 2011). It has been suggested by researchers that the length of stay at the host institution has an effect on the student's acculturation as they have more opportunities to assimilate into the host culture; the longer the international student stays in the host country, the more acculturated they will be. This is an issue for graduate students in particular as their academic programs are typically for only two to five years.

Social support also helps in the alleviation of feelings of homesickness, which is a result of culture shock (Han, Kim, Lee, Pistulka, & Kim, 2007; Hirai, Frazier, and Syed, 2015). Furthermore, homesickness is an inevitable part of the acculturation process and, therefore, experienced by the international student regardless of their prior knowledge and exposure to U.S. culture. Cross-cultural adjustment is essentially the response that the international graduate student has to their new environment as they attempt to adapt and function within it (Hendrickson et al., 2013). As we relate this process to acculturation, we can understand that an intercultural adaptation occurs for the international student upon their arrival to the new environment.

There are several personal and institutional barriers to the international graduate student seeking professional help (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey &

Roysircar, 2006). The emotional barriers have to do with the international student experiencing feelings of shame, fear of stigma, lack of awareness of what services the host institution offers, and cost of services. The institutional barriers, simply put, have to do with the availability of mental health services for ethnic minorities (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006). Many international students are mistrustful of the mental health professionals on their campus as they expect cultural differences to play a significant role in the services that they receive (Mori, 2000). Furthermore, the fear that the

international graduate student might have regarding seeking professional help for mental health issues has much to do with their home countries view on mental health and counseling (Blignault, Ponzio, Rong, & Eisenbruch, 2008; Frey & Roysircar, 2006).

## Methodology

I began the data collection process by holding two focus group sessions, where between four and five participants in each session were prompted with questions designed to elicit dialogue regarding their experiences while at the host university. All participants were provided with voluntary consent forms that were to be signed and returned prior to the first focus group session. The research project was reviewed and approved by the SIUC Human Subjects Committee. The first focus group session consisted of only female international graduate students; the second session consisted of only male international graduate students. I had previously conducted a mock focus group, therefore, the process was familiar to me.

During focus group sessions, I recorded the conversations so as to replay it while simultaneously referring to my handwritten notes of the information shared during the session. In sequential order, I used Open, Pattern, Values-based, and Emotional coding. All four coding methods served as tools to gain a deeper understanding of not only what the participants were saying but also the way in which the words were said, essentially observing their mannerisms. Additionally, I used Triangulation, which allowed me to get a more comprehensive picture of the phenomena through data gathered from not only the focus groups but also the individual interviews. To help minimize bias in my coding, I used Interrater Reliability, which helped me assess my interpretation of information and potential themes along with that of a fellow Ph.D. student who assisted me with the coding process. This was especially useful for data that was considered subjective.

## Background of Participants

There were ten (five women and five men) international graduate students that participated in this study. Fortunately, I was able to garner interest from participants from varying backgrounds and majors. In having variation, I was able to get different perspectives regarding their adjustment experiences as it related to their upbringing, cultures, and their respective departmental academic demands. As previously mentioned, in order to protect the participant's identity, pseudonyms were immediately ascribed to each of them upon receiving confirmation regarding their commitment of participation in the study.

Table 1: Participant Information

Name	Country of Origin	Degree to be Awarded
<b>Liana</b>	<b>Bangladesh</b>	<b>Masters</b>
<b>Jill</b>	<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>Ph.D.</b>
<b>Patricia</b>	<b>Mongolia</b>	<b>Masters</b>
<b>Myra</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>Ph.D.</b>
<b>Jenn</b>	<b>Zambia</b>	<b>Ph.D.</b>
<b>Michael</b>	<b>Nigeria</b>	<b>Ph.D.</b>
<b>Ryan</b>	<b>India</b>	<b>Ph.D.</b>
<b>John</b>	<b>Japan</b>	<b>Masters/ Ph.D.</b>
<b>Stephen</b>	<b>Colombia</b>	<b>Ph.D.</b>
<b>Kyle</b>	<b>Nepal</b>	<b>Masters</b>

## Data Analysis

The most poignant emotions that were expressed during both the focus group sessions and interviews, were loneliness and isolation. There was a consensus in both the male and female focus groups in that as the participants began their adjustment process at the host university they experienced various types of loneliness and isolation. For the majority of the participants, the isolation that they experienced was preceded and caused by their feelings of loneliness. All ten of the participants shared that they have experienced some

form of social isolation since entering graduate school at the host university, especially during the period of their initial arrival. The social isolation that they experienced is multifactorial and is confounded, at times, by other adjustment stressors.

Many of the participants expressed that they believe that it is the responsibility of University staff to help alleviate feelings of social isolation that international graduate students experience, primarily through the advertising of events being held both on and off campus. Though participants shared that they mostly rely on their own social connections to remain in the loop regarding upcoming events, the majority of the participants expressed that they wished that University staff did a better job of outreach to the international graduate student population. Social loneliness can also be viewed as a cyclical term as it has the ability to affect and be affected by other types of loneliness, such as Interpersonal Loneliness.

For the male participants, the shared sentiment was that the distance was a necessary part of the process in order to accomplish the end goal of obtaining their graduate degree. All of the participants shared that academics had been a major challenge in their adjustment to the host university. The participants shared that stress related to academic achievement played a role in perpetuating another type of loneliness, Academic loneliness. With the exception of one participant, Patricia, who shared that even amidst her highly demanding academic schedule she was still able to attend many social events, all of the participants shared numerous stories about how academic and research demands served as barriers to their adjustment to the host university.

Two other prominent themes that emerged were the usage of social media and finances. For all ten of the participants, social media not only served as an outlet but was also their primary forum for maintaining contact with loved ones and friends in their home countries. One theme that I had not considered would present itself prior to the start of the data collection process was how the lack of financial stability, specifically the lack of funding, might have an effect on the adjustment experience of international graduate students. For several of the participants, much of their stress was rooted in a lack of financial security. All ten of the participants shared that they believe that the host university staff can and should do more to meet their adjustment needs.

## Limitations and Discussion

Though this study discusses how stereotypes and generalizations based off of culture, religion, etc. play a role in the adjustment experience for international graduate students, there should be more exploration done on the cyclical nature of xenophobia and how it is both affected by and affects the visiting student's experience. Several participants shared how they felt that they were an overlooked population that were only valued as members of the host university community during specific times. In looking at stereotypes and its effects through the lens of the participants, it would provide another dimension to emotions related to isolation and loneliness as well. Another remaining gap in literature is the exploration of current institutional and state policy changes effective since January 2017 that might have affected the international graduate student experience at the host university. Since massive political changes are currently being undergone, it will be interesting to see what the number of incoming international graduate student attendance will be in upcoming academic years. To this end, it is imperative that researchers explore the guidelines and standards that are in place, both on the institutional and state levels.

## Results

This qualitative study was driven by the desire to explore the experiences of international graduate students at the host university. The overarching themes that emerged: 1) Loneliness and Isolation, 2) Social Media 3) Mental Health & Support, 4) Professor and Student Dynamic 5) Financial Stability 6) Overall University Support were explored in order to provide insight into the needs of this population. For many of the participants, a prominent adjustment challenge was overcoming language barriers (Barnham, 2015). Furthermore, many of the participants shared how language barriers worked in conjunction with other adjustment stressors, such as new classroom environment to elicit emotions related to loneliness and isolation. Speaking once more to the interconnectedness of the adjustment stressors, is how many of the participants shared that

their issues with academic adjustment had the strongest impact on their psychological adjustment at the host university. Even in regards to sleeping patterns, several participants discussed how they faced difficulty getting rest at night due to feelings of loneliness and also the lack of noise in which they were used to. This lack of sleep affected not only their ability to properly function but also contributed to the development of emotional issues. This supports current literature, where it is discussed how the lack of sleep coupled with adjustment stress, have the potential to directly result in feelings of anxiety for the international graduate student.

Emotional wellness is something that the host university staff must view as a primary concern for this population and work to ensure that there are proper staff in place to meet their emotional and mental health needs. Mental health continues to be a taboo topic and is especially so for this population. The majority of the participants shared that they rely on their families, though thousands of miles away, to provide them with support when needed.

## Conclusion

The six themes that emerged speak to many areas of adjustment and the findings shed light on new issues of acculturation such as stereotypes and its relationship and effect(s) on mental health. Yet, the findings also support current literature. For many of the participants, a prominent adjustment challenge was overcoming language barriers (McClure et al., 2007). Furthermore, many of the participants shared how language barriers worked in conjunction with other adjustment stressors, such as new classroom environment to elicit emotions related to loneliness and isolation. This supports researchers Erichsen & Bollinger's (2010) article where they wrote on the interconnected nature of adjustment stressors and their resulting effects of loneliness and emotions related to isolation.

It is critical that University staff work towards ensuring that the international graduate student has acculturated into their new educational setting. Speaking once more to the interconnectedness of the adjustment stressors, is how many of the participants shared that their issues with academic adjustment had the strongest impact on their psychological adjustment at the University (Frazier et al., 2011; Hyun et al., 2007). This leads me to a central component of this manuscript, understanding how the adjustment stressors affect the emotional health of the international graduate student at the University. As I listened to the participants share how their adjustment to the University, community, and the U.S. as a whole affected their mental health, it was understood how different their mental health needs are from that of domestic graduate students. Even in regards to sleeping patterns, several participants spoke about how they faced difficulty getting rest at night due to feelings of loneliness and also the lack of noise in which they were used to. This lack of sleep affected not only their ability to properly function but also contributed to the development of emotional issues. This supports current literature which discusses how the lack of sleep coupled with adjustment stress, have the potential to directly result in feelings of anxiety for the international graduate student.

Emotional wellness is something that University staff must view as a primary concern for this population and work to ensure that there are proper staff in place to meet their emotional and mental health needs. Mental health continues to be a taboo topic, especially so for this population. The majority of the participants shared that they rely on their families, though thousands of miles away, to provide them with support when needed. The stigma that surrounds receiving mental health is a major barrier in international graduate students deciding to seek help and is the responsibility of the University to help de-stigmatize students seeking mental health support.

This study's findings support current literature in regards to social media and its role

in having a positive effect on the adjustment experience of international graduate students (Ye,

2006). Participants shared how social media sites such as Facebook and Viber served as outlets and ways for them to cope with their adjustment stressors. The findings from this study also spoke to the implicit need for University support efforts to be expanded. Many of the participants shared how they felt more supported during their initial arrival at the host University and that the support faded as the semester went

on. Therefore, all efforts in the form of programs and services for this population should be sustainable throughout the year. In order to ensure that this happens, there should be a merging of select University staff, instructors and educators to work to make the experiences of these visiting students a much more positive and fulfilling one (Szabo, Ward and Jose, 2015).

The findings from this study provide insight into the experiences of ten international graduate students and how these experiences played a role in their overall adjustment while at the host University. It should serve as the bridge between what is being done to support the acculturation experience for international graduate students and more importantly, what needs to be expanded upon or implemented. Therefore, this study provides insight for University staff, health educators/practitioners, and domestic students alike on ways in which they can be a part of alleviating the adjustment issues that international graduate students encounter.

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